



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

AN ITALIAN VIEW OF HUMOR.*

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

(First Paper.)

THE jolly frankness of the author's own phrase can best give a notion of the amiable book by Signor Paolo Bellezza, which has lately come to my hand from Italy, and which I should like to make the excuse for a few words of my own on the matter it treats of. He quotes a countryman of his who says, of another work, "This book is not made out of books," and then he adds, "Of this work of mine I must confess exactly the contrary; it is made exclusively out of books; it is a great lot of stuff gathered from everywhere except from my brain. . . . It is a necklace of pearls strung upon a slender cord; that, I have put there; the pearls have been furnished me by the most famous jewelers, native and foreign. This said, I can—without being accused of pride—recommend it to my respectable customers as an article of great value and of absolute novelty." It is for his reviewer to protest that the stringer of the pearls undervalues the slender cord, which is no inanimate string, but a sensitive nerve, alive with fine sympathy for the pearls it holds together. The book is indeed mainly a compilation, but a compilation infused with the taste, the intelligence, and the cultivation of the compiler, who is, perhaps, only just to himself in claiming that it is "the first study treating of humor with a certain amplitude, and in its multiple forms and manifestations," and who is surely right in hoping "that it may prove acceptable at least as an attempt in the direction that such a study ought to take." I will say even more for him (unless it should be saying less), and add that among his many saws and instances, his saws are some-

*Paola Bellezza. "Humour." *Strenna a Beneficio del Pio Istituto dei Rachitici*. Milano. 1900.

times the best; the nerve is finer than the message it carries, the cord more precious than the pearl. But undoubtedly most readers will find pleasure in his book because of the instances, though they should all the more, therefore, be admonished to regard the saws.

I.

Signor Bellezza treats by precept and example, in a series of fifteen chapters, of what humor is and is not; of the essence of humor; of humorous wisdom; of humorous illustrations taken from Dickens; of humorous sensibility; of the ugly phases of humor; of humorous motives; of the whims of humorists; of the psychology of the humorist; of the humorous view of shipwreck, earthquake, misery, famine and cannibalism; of mad and anomalous humor; of grisly humor, concerning murders, suicides and executions; of humor in art; of the balance of humor in modern literature; of the classic home of humor. In all these chapters he practices such sane restraint in the selection of his proofs that he can rarely be accused of what may be called Lombrosoism; but, when accused, he cannot be wholly acquitted of it. This is not so heinous in a countryman of Lombroso's, but it is something to warn the reader of, and it will be well to weigh the evidences which Signor Bellezza accumulates with such a generous, I will not say indiscriminate, hand.

Certainly he cannot be blamed with profusion, with a weak prodigality which is finally not hospitality, in providing examples of humor from the writings of his own people. He not merely confesses, but he protests with groans and sighs of rejection that there is no humor in the "*Divina Commedia*," as some Italian critics seem fondly to have claimed; and apparently he does not find it in his scheme to dwell long upon the Bernesque poets, who were unquestionably among the earliest of the modern humorists, though we now find it as hard to laugh at Berni, and Ariosto, and Pulci, and the author of the "*Rape of the Bucket*," as we do at Shakespeare when Shakespeare means to be funniest. He draws most upon Manzoni, and rightly, as I think every lover of humor will own, in recalling the delicious character of Don Abbondio in "*I Promessi Sposi*"; but he scarcely does justice to Giusti, among the modern poets, or to that school of comic dramatists who flourished in Italy between 1855 and 1875, and who preceded the realistic novelists, whom again he is hardly

just to. I could have wished also that in his chapter on humor in art, he could have found it in his conscience or his modesty to touch upon the rise and spread of comic Italian journalism, in which I am sure he would have found matter to convince him that he was underestimating Italian humor. This humor, in its comic journalistic avatar, is too apt to form itself upon the French humor, which in motive is apt to be so nasty, in every sense, so mean, so cynical, so salacious. It is for the most part a putrescent shimmer around the ruins of the seventh commandment, but I doubt if it is the true expression of Italian humor. I doubt for that matter if it is the true expression of French humor, but think it rather the ready convention of the humorists, just as with us a bleak and hardy pessimism concerning marriage for money and the broken engagements of summer girls is the refuge of our hard-pushed cartoonists. At any rate, from a very casual and cursory knowledge of the comic Italian journals I have the sense of something sweeter, which I fancy also more native. I remember from long ago the amusing and altogether inoffensive dismay of the lady who finds herself growing stout just at the moment she has met her fate, and who regards herself in the pitiless mirror with a gesture of despair, and the wild cry, "O, ingrassare adesso!" I remember yet another bit of like innocent humor: the hard lot of the man, on duty during some civic disturbance, who sees pass him the girl he has been looking for so long, and whom he recognizes with the wail of anguish, "Ritrovarla adesso che son proprio qua in sentinella!"

Very likely there were others, which I have forgotten, and I choose to believe that Signor Bellezza could have made an indefinitely better showing for his country in the article of humor if he had suffered himself to regard it without his prepossessions in favor of England and of the Gothic countries generally, of which our own is one, largely if tardily. It is taking up his argument quite at its close to note that he holds England to be the classic home of humor, but he does not fail to extend the honor to the whole English-speaking race. He could not, of course, get in all the American humorists, for he was not writing an encyclopædia, but he gets in eight (some rather by the hair of their heads), and our greatest humorist of all is mentioned and cited more times than any other humorist in the world except Dickens. In fact, without Mr. Clemens, whom it is not necessarily amusing

to find always spoken of as Il Twain (Signor Bellezza tells us that his real name is Samuele Langhorne), the book would be far less rich than it is in the humor which the author draws so preferably from the Gothic sources. Without him, certainly the preponderance would not be so heavy against the Latin races. Nevertheless, Signor Bellezza is right in assigning the humoristic primacy to the Gothic peoples, for the very obvious reason that the South loves the Beautiful, and the North loves the Grotesque. The grotesque is apparently painful rather than delightful to the man of Hellenic or Italic origin. In the one matter, to allege no other, of the foreigner's blundering in his language, he proves this. It is evidently anguish to him, and not that gross delight with which we witness an alien's struggles with our tongue, venting itself in half-stifled snortings of laughter, comparable to nothing but the rapture of boys at the suffering of a companion who has burnt his fingers, or is caught among wasps, or has developed a latent nail in a sliding-place.

Gothic architecture has its well-known moods, when it testifies to this essential difference between the Northern and Southern races, and parades a pig in a monk's cowl among the gracious traceries of fruit and flower beside a cathedral door. But I am afraid Signor Bellezza goes too far in denying all humor to antiquity, which is Southern, and conversely assigning it altogether to modernity, which is Northern. The "Battle of the Frogs and Mice" is not a bad piece of humor; there is fun in Aristophanes of a bitter flavor; Diogenes said rather a humorous thing when he answered Alexander that he could do nothing so much for him as stand out of his light; and certainly the practice of the Socratic method, as the sage himself applied it for the confusion of his fellow citizens, must have provoked at least dry grins from the bystander, who saw the victim entangling himself in the meshes of the inexorable question. We may be sure that it was the irony of this method which brought Socrates to his sad end, and that he came to drink the hemlock because he had often pressed the bitter draught of his wit to the lips of the most respectable Athenians, who publicly suffered from the general sense of humor in an appreciative community.

II.

To come abruptly back to his own people, I wish to say again that Signor Bellezza hardly does them justice. If we are not

allowed to regard "The Prince" as a piece of grim drolling, from first to last, there are moments in it when we can hardly deny the irony of Machiavelli. Aretino is supposed unmentionable, but in his savage and indecent sort he was unquestionably a humorist, and I cannot believe that there was ever any one who saw life more humorously than Goldoni. As he reported it in his own personal experience, it was most amusing; and Alfieri himself saw his own extravagances with the eye of the satirist.

But it is most with the Spaniards that Signor Bellezza fails to make out his case against the South. If we begin with Cervantes in *Don Quixote*, and come down with Quevedo and Hurtado de Mendoza in their picaresque tales, to such immediate moderns as Perez Galdós and Armando Palacio Valdés, we have an unsurpassed series of humorists; unsurpassed even in the classic home of humor itself. Señor Valdés alone is sufficient to relieve his nation and epoch from the reproach of sterility in this sort, and the people who let us load ourselves up with the Philip-pines at a cost of twenty million dollars must have been convulsed with laughter to see us re-establishing slavery within our limits and draping a Mahometan prince in the tatters of our constitution. This, of course, is only plausible conjecture, but it is hard not to believe it actual fact when one reads such humorous studies of manners, such keen criticisms of social life, as *Leon Roch*, or *Carlos IV.*, or *El Cuarto Poder*, or *Riverito*, or *La Hermana de San Sulpizio*, or *La Alegria del Capitan Ribot*.

III.

It is a comfort not to have Signor Bellezza distinguish, or try to distinguish, between wit and humor. He forbears, possibly, because there are no two words in Italian quite answering to these. In any case, his forbearance saves him and us from anything like a disquisition on the difference between French wit and English humor. He seems to take it for granted that the French have humor essentially the same as the English, and though he does not allege any overwhelming number of instances in proof, those he gives are very good. He gives even out of so dark a tragedy as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* instances which I had never noted or had forgotten, but which one would say were certainly English if he had not found them there. The poor fellow who has lost his club foot through her husband's malpractice comes to her funeral in a new wooden leg to show her respect,

and a peasant who has walked to the burial in a fresh blouse, arrives with his weeping face all blue from rubbing it full of the dye from his sleeves.

This is almost as grisly drolling as the gallows-humor which our author finds chiefly among the Germans, who invented the name for it, *Galgenhumor*, if not the thing itself. They may only have made it their own, and naturalized it among them, after it spread to them from England, like the romantic movement. This supposition might base itself upon Heine's saying that the Arabs have a thousand names for a horse, the Germans for drinking, and the English for hanging; and find support in the fact that it has had no greater development outside of Germany than among the English-speaking race in our own country. It has, as it were, come home to us, and with all the kindred brood of jokes about murders, funerals, suicides, accidents, and the like, flourishes more abundantly here than anywhere else in the world.

Signor Bellezza draws largely upon our gallows-humor, but not so largely quite upon the German. The chief source of his humorous instances in that nation are rightly taken from Heinrich Heine, who, for altogether different reasons and qualities, must stand with Shakespeare and Mark Twain foremost among the humorists of the world. Even if one adds Cervantes and Rabelais to the group, Heine is still supreme, for what John Fiske called a shimmer of emotion—humorous emotion; and he has no second except, perhaps, in Sterne, who was also his first. That is, he derived from Sterne, in the same measure that Tourguénief derived from Pushkin, and with the same effect of making you feel that his master had imitated him.

IV.

I have a feeling that Signor Bellezza might with advantage have dwelt more, among the Russians, on the great Russian I have named, but he satisfies himself with recognizing chiefly the immense humorousness of Gogol, whose *Dead Souls* is one of the vastest schemes in that sort in all literature. In fact, outside of *Don Quixote* it would be hard to parallel it. The resistless comicality, interwoven with the despairing pathos, is strictly Northern, however, and there is a sort of moral squalor in the motive wholly alien to the high satiric intention of the Spaniard. It is a civilization which Gogol satirizes, and it was the mood of a

civilization at which Cervantes mocked, though not with greater lightness. Pushkin's short stories (all I know of his work) show him the worthy father of the delicate scorn which plays through the realism of Tourguénief, and which in such books as *Smoke*, as *Fathers and Sons*, as *The Nest of Nobles*, as *Dimitri Roudine*, becomes at times an anguish of pathos. I do not now recall any phases of Dostoyevsky that could be called humorous, but it would be judging Tolstoy very narrowly not to count him among the great humorists. His sarcasm is, of course, terrible, and we cannot distinguish between sarcasm and humor, or relegate it to the region of wit, if that is anywhere apart; but he has moments of pure humor which are of unsurpassed quality. One of these occurs in that wonderful story of *Polikushka* where two poor muzhiks are watching with a dead body. They have just come from the barnyard; they know that they smell offensively, and they try, at the approach of a respectable person, to make themselves as small as possible. In *War and Peace* is an abundant play of humor in the treatment of several characters, notably that arch humbug, Prince Basil, and the eccentric old father of Prince André, and Pierre, the hero himself. There is nothing more harrowingly and humiliatingly amusing than the scene where, when Prince Basil's daughter Helen has failed to bring Besoukhov to an offer of marriage, the old prince rushes in, after she leaves the room, and flings his arms around Pierre's neck, and accepts him for his son-in-law. He knows very well that there has been no lovemaking, but he compels a marriage between Helen and Pierre by sheer force of his assumption that the young people are engaged. Pierre's part in the battle of Borodino, in spite of the tragic staging, is a comedy part. The father and mother of the divine Natasha, divinely girlish and sincere, are a comedy father and mother, and Natasha herself is humorously as well as beautifully imagined. The flight of young Rostoff before the French, with all that play of terror and self-pity in his mind, and of astonishment that the Frenchmen should wish to kill such a kind, good person as himself, is alive with a humor which is peculiarly Tolstoyan, and is quite unlike the ordinary humor of literature in being exactly like the humor of life. The ferocious reprobate and reckless blackguard (I forget his name), whom Pierre shoots by a kind of accident in a strictly comedy duel, is a personality conceived in a spirit of unsparring yet conscientious humor, and

the self-satisfaction of those two bores, Vera Rostoff and her husband Berg, and their entire content with each other, is as veraciously as it is freshly humorous.

As for Anna Karenina, there never was a more comical creature than her worthless brother, whom we find at the opening of the book in the ruins of the home he has wrecked, vainly trying to make as if nothing had happened. Anna's husband, though he has such a tragical part to bear, bears it without dignity, and is at times entirely ridiculous. The book throngs with ghastly shapes of sin and shame, and pietism and hypocrisy, conceived as humorously as the figures in the *Dance of Death*. The soul when it goes naked in its selfishness is always actually or potentially absurd and the soul always goes naked in Tolstoy's page, though the personality is clothed on with the usual fashions, moral and material. For this reason, *The Cossacks*, where the soul of the hero has never anything on to keep us from knowing him, is one of the most humorous books in literature. Even *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch* is a tragedy luminous with the pitiless light of a humor that shows everything. Everywhere the humor of Tolstoy is of the same quality, and is of the absolute sincerity of nature. It is never arranged or posed, but has the currency, the fluidity of the emotions, which he, more than any man who ever lived, knows how to reveal; I was going to say betray, but they betray themselves. Beside him all other humorists have something factitious, contrived, premeditated; he has simply the sad fidelity of a knowledge of humanity that is the nearest like omniscience, and that is incapable of the poor insincerity of the literary poseurs; all other writers seem literary poseurs in his presence.

V.

Signor Bellezza cites but a single example of Tolstoy's humor, and that not one of his best, in his chapter on the humor which contrasts men and brutes, and finds men inferior, or, at least, less respectable. "Tolstoy goes farther: in his *Story of a Horse* he institutes a parallel between the horse that passes his whole life toiling submissively and usefully, and his master, who is rich, selfish, dishonest, and helps nobody. They both die: the flesh of the horse furnishes food for the dogs and crows; even his bones serve to make buttons; the carcase of his master is good for nothing." I am rather glad to have had this example offered

to my hand, for I should instance it as an effect of that didacticism in Tolstoy which has the least of his inspiration. One touch of his characterization of men, as they show comic even in mortal stresses, such as the reader will find in *The Scenes of the Siege of Sebastopol*, is worth all the grim morals that he labors out of his apologies.

So far as I have noted, Signor Bellezza finds nothing to his purpose in the modern Scandinavian authors, though, without going to the Danes for the whimsical poetic humor of Hans Christian Andersen, the Norwegians, at least, are abundantly humorous. The little tales of Kielland are masterpieces of irony in their social implications, and there is delightful humor in Björnson, though not in all his books. *Magnhild* is a humorous conception of the subtlest and deepest sort; and for the presentation of a histrionic character upon nature's own terms, I know nothing better than his work in evolving the heroine of *The Fishermayden*, which has deliciously comic situations. None of his plays are without the tricky light of irony, which is in Ibsen a steady flame that scorches. In a way it may be said that Ibsen's whole view of life is ironical. Think of *Ghosts*, and *The Pillars of Society*, and *The Enemy of the People*, and the irony glares at you through the very names. In *The Wild Duck* and *The Doll House* and *Little Eyolf* it is as pitiless of the witness as of the actors; one must humble one's self for one's own peace' sake before the spectacle of human absurdity which includes one's self. But, above all, *Ghosts* is supremely humorous, though in such a ghastly, tragic sort that one does not easily laugh. When I remember this, I wonder at myself for not having grouped Ibsen with my other greatest humorists, scarcely below the level of Tolstoy. He is really below him less in a humorous vision of life than in the expression of it upon the more mechanical conditions of the drama, which is his form while the epic is Tolstoy's.

VI.

I am not versed in the modern literature of Portugal, and I am not able to say that it is not the most humorous in Europe; I should say the Hungarian would willingly be so if Jokai had his way with himself. He seems to me, in what I have read of him, rather ineffectively fantastic than actually humorous. There were humorous opportunities, rather than humorous achievements in Sinkiewicz's *Sons of the Soil*, which is the only one of his novels

of modern life that I know. In his prevalently historical fiction he must be too much engrossed in purveying catastrophes for his reader, to have time for amusing him and instructing him through the study of mankind; but I am not, therefore, denying a large humorous literature to the Poles; it may be as great, for all I know, as the Portuguese itself. The Polish Jews, if we may speak from some few developments of Yiddish literature among ourselves, are not without a sense of one another's drollness; perhaps it is the novel light of the new world which has revealed them to themselves. The Russian Jews, in Mr. Abraham Cahan, at least, have come to a humorous consciousness here which is of a charming sort, whatever it may be at home. I should instance this writer as one whose vision of life, never ignoring its pathos, was purely humorous. It is the more humorous because it is so pathetic, if I may be forgiven the commonplace. His *Jekl* is without rival in its kind here, though in Russia the work of the Jews may be rich in *Jekls*. I should not be surprised if it were, for the Jews are rather prolific of humorists everywhere. Not to recur to Heine, who is Olympian for looking down on the ridiculous spectacle that we, including himself, present to the high gods in the bird's-eye view they have of us, there is, for example, the archironical Disraeli, who was able to travesty English life in novels of such fantastic impossibility that their audacious personality was lost in it, and who in statecraft was able to beguile a great people into an imperialistic self-satisfaction so destitute of humor that he could wink the other eye in Jovian amusement at the success of his malign achievement, without awakening suspicion of his seriousness.

W. D. HOWELLS.